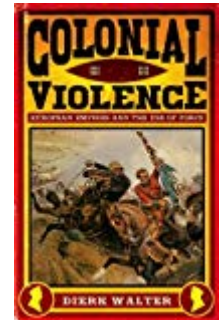


Dierk Walter. *Colonial Violence: European Empires and the Use of Force.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017. pp \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-084000-6.



Reviewed by Oliver Charbonneau

Published on H-War (December, 2019)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Near the beginning of his study, Dierk Walter quotes Daniel Headrick, who wrote that the “history of imperialism is the history of warfare” (p. 4). This is surely true, yet imperial warfare has often been presented in a partial way that privileges major conflicts between European empires.[1] Colonial wars in so-called peripheral zones—the dominant form of conflict under the imperial umbrella—often go unremarked upon. In these spaces, violence is more likely to emerge from cultural dissonance, race-thinking, and small-scale capitalist jockeying than from global geopolitics. *Colonial Violence* is a study of these conflicts and an argument for why we should classify them as distinct. It is, in other words, a typology. Walter's stated goal is to “synthesize empirical observations in order to identify patterns which will show the violent elements of imperialism to be an identifiable structural phenomenon, and to give a coherent explanation for its logic of conflict” (p. 6). To accomplish this, the book avoids strict periodization and does not adhere to the boundaries of individual empires. The analysis is, unsurprisingly, far-

reaching, moving forward and backward across centuries in search of unifying characteristics. This is a complex, empirically saturated text that parses relationships of violence from the sixteenth-century Iberian conquest of the Americas to the present-day Euro-American military interventions in the Greater Middle East. Each of its body chapters could likely be expanded into a stand-alone monograph, which hopefully gives one a sense of Walther's topical range (and the challenges this presents to a reviewer).

The book's first and longest chapter considers shared conditions of imperial warfare. Its ten sections build a case for understanding organized violence on the periphery as fundamentally different from the “traditional” major state conflicts of Europe. Much of this uniqueness originates in destabilizing elements: unfamiliar and climactically challenging environments with scant infrastructure; overstretched supply chains and weak communications networks; metropolitan insistence that colonies should fund themselves (and accompanying resource scarcity); diverse indige-

nous adversaries with their own cultures of violence; low troop ratios to area size and population. The list could—and does—go on. Walter also adds imperial strengths to his calculus, which include the ability to wage war with little or no physical threat to the metropolitan core, and the tendency to sow, harness, and benefit from political fragmentation in conquered societies. These dynamics, in turn, create something of a feedback loop. The global reach and organizational capacities of European empires permitted an endless succession of colonial wars, yet the above factors hampered satisfactory resolutions. The very fragmentation that created local allies also made negotiating difficult, particularly in multistate or stateless societies. The outcome was often near-permanent armed hostilities. Walter urges us to consider “actual” imperial wars as “temporary concentrations in space and time of an endemic state of everyday violence on the margins of empire” (p. 77). In other words, intensified military conflict in these zones emerged from an already violent baseline. This “temporal unboundedness,” the author suggests, is a signature of imperial warfare and an argument for its distinctiveness.

Chapter 2 examines the objectives of empires and their adversaries, and the justifications each used to wage war. Here Walter acknowledges the limitations of the archival record with regard to indigenous voices, but still manages to present a portrait of anti-imperial actors that avoids a simplistic victim-perpetrator binary. Resistance emerged for diverse reasons, including (but not limited to): local factionalism; settler raids; land and resource expropriation; slaving and forced labor; shifting alliances; downturns in the global economy; and discriminatory laws. The chapter concludes that imperial objectives were manifestly limited and driven by the desire for economic dominance. Ensuing conflict often had an opportunistic quality and was veiled in the moralistic rationales of the civilizing mission, which presented force as a form of stern education. Violence, then, was not “total and absolute” but instead a

“flexible function of a dynamic process of the creation of imperial dominance and control” (p. 146).

Walter eschews the notion of “total war” in the context of empire, viewing the term as more appropriate to describe conflict between “complex industrial societies with a tradition of regulated and contained warfare” (p. 149), yet acknowledges the boundaryless quality of violence in colonial environments. Chapter 3 sets about explaining this. Violence on the imperial periphery arose from a complex array of factors, often stemming from chauvinistic Western presumptions that indigenous cultures of violence were “savage” or “illegal” because they did not hew closely to European military and legal traditions. The “universal lawlessness” of the native required colonial troops to downgrade their own standards of warfare. This self-vindicating logic led to violent escalation. Walter does well to highlight the insecurities of empire here. Colonial soldiers and administrators arrived in new territories already terrified of the natives and the environment, which merged as unitary landscapes of threat. Fear legitimized massacre, leading to cycles of retribution and permanent states of exception.

Chapter 4 presents a diverse array of “violent actors” and patterns of conflict in its consideration of asymmetry, adaptation, and learning. It questions traditional accounts of imperial conflict for their reifications of colonial models, rightly challenging the idea that on one side was a disciplined professional European army and on the other an indigenous “swarm.” While imperial conquerors often outlasted their adversaries through sheer “methodological doggedness,” they did so by using irregular forces, from indigenous auxiliaries to settler militias (p. 202). Imperial and indigenous repertoires of violence shifted over time, each in dialogue with the other, although European racism frequently obscured the quest to learn from native cultures of violence, especially in the upper echelons of the military elite. Counterinsurgency specialists found themselves

marginalized within military communities, which remained focused on threats to the metropolitan core and the development of weapons systems best suited for major state conflict. Nevertheless, indigenous societies did force Europeans to adapt. Native groups developed their own anti-imperial knowledge communities, adopted Western technologies, and often refused to participate in decisive battles. Learning and transfers between Euro-American empires are only briefly remarked upon in this chapter and would have benefited the analysis. Walter avoids drawing hard conclusions, arguing that imperial warfare is governed by reciprocal exchange while also admitting that a receptivity or rejection of learning is not always a reliable marker of success or failure.

What does this all add up to? Imperial conflict is a “form of warfare whose defining characteristic is that it does not follow the logic of large-scale wars fought in the West” (p. 267). Many factors make this so, in Walter’s estimation: a lack of decisive military outcomes; low operational intensity; cultural collisions; reliance on indigenous collaborators; environmental challenges. The book closes with a reflection on the persistence of these types of conflict in the neocolonial interventions of twenty-first century. As they evolve, contemporary transcultural clashes develop many of the same features of their imperial antecedents, becoming “devoid of temporal, spatial, and structural boundaries of any kind” (p. 274).

There is a need for volumes like this one. Typologies of imperial warfare are few and far between—although there is an emerging body of scholarship that considers what was distinctive about violence in colonial settings.[2] As Walter notes in the introduction, much of the extant material on the topic is in the form of case studies that focus on a limited time period, individual empire, or specific transcultural encounter. Broader studies often appear in the form of counterinsurgency texts meant for military learning. In the Anglo-American world, this lineage goes back to

works like Charles Callwell’s *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* and continues today with Army Field Manual 3-24.[3] Walter’s book is more critical and reflective, avoiding proscriptive conclusions in its exploration of the specific features of imperial warfare. Unlike many military histories, *Colonial Violence* incorporates indigenous/colonized peoples into its analysis. They appear here not only as allies and adversaries of Western empires, but as representatives of complex societies with their own histories of political and armed conflict pre- and ante-dating colonial incursion. Walter excels in his analysis on the translational dimensions of these conflicts. How different cultures understood (or, more often, did not) one another shaped boundaryless violence in the colonies.

The book’s theoretical structure is bolstered by an enormous number of illustrative examples. I can think of few (no?) monographs where Spanish *conquistadores*, Nepalese Gurkhas, Dahomey warriors, and US Special Forces share space within a unitary narrative arc. The sheer weight of empirical detail is at once impressive and overwhelming, demonstrating the author’s familiarity with myriad historiographical subfields but also diluting analytical impact. For a book aiming to be a standard reference on imperial warfare, one could imagine the utility of a slimmer, more streamlined version of the controlling typology—something resembling Jürgen Osterhammel’s overview of colonialism, perhaps.[4]

At the risk of stating the obvious, any study that places five centuries of global conflict within a unified conceptual framework is attempting something very ambitious, and there are shortcomings here. The title itself is something of a misnomer. The 2014 German original, *Organisierte Gewalt in der Europäischen Expansion: Gestalt und Logik des Imperialkrieges* (roughly, “Organized violence in European expansion: the shape and logic of imperial war”), more accurately describes its contents. This is a work of military

history. It is far-reaching and incorporates valuable insights from other areas (notably on environment, technology, race, and cultural transfer), but does not provide a taxonomy of colonial violence in toto. In recent decades, scholarship on empire has increasingly focused on the violence of the everyday.[5] Walter's model of endless war on the periphery allows for this, although does not shine much light onto how violence became structurally embedded in the imperial way of life. This often occurred through the biopolitical management of colonized bodies by Euro-American authorities and their local interlocutors. Women and children suffered inordinately from sexual violence, removal programs, and terror campaigns despite their infrequent role as armed combatants, yet they appear rarely in this book. Settler societies, which set the benchmark for prolonged violence against indigenous groups, are likewise mostly absent. Walter is quite good at describing frontier conquest in North America, for instance, but systematic deracination campaigns are unexamined. Parsing what is or is not privileged as violence might not be a useful conversation in a conventional military history, but key to Walter's arguments is the idea that violence in imperial settings is unique due to its unbounded qualities. How, then, do we set parameters on what deserves inclusion in a study like this?

An issue of interpretation arises from the relationship between race, economics, settlement, and prestige politics in Walter's explanation of imperial goals. As detailed earlier, Walter claims empire's objectives were limited, stemming primarily from desires for metropolitan enrichment. Violence grew out of ground-level frustrations when easy conquest and gold were not forthcoming, or when indigenous societies did not magically transform into a reliable labor pool for capitalist enterprise. All very true, but can we create such neat causal chains? Economic fantasies, cultural chauvinism, scientific racism, and environmental disorientation all blurred into one another. The genocidal massacres perpetrated by settler groups

or colonial auxiliaries, for instance, often emerged from frontier race panics, only to be rationalized *post facto* as legitimate protection of land and livelihood from a barbarous enemy. This raises the question of limits and limitations. Positioning imperial goals as manifestly limited, and violence as the result of long-term or situational escalation, elides the fundamentally transformational vision of many colonial regimes. Enforced conversion, economic modernization, acculturation, or gun-barrel democratization are forms of structural violence and frequently embedded in the operating logics of the colonial project. They almost always engender some form of armed conflict.

The United States invaded Iraq for a second time in the early 2000s under the pretext of deposing an authoritarian government. What began as a conventional military confrontation quickly transformed into something else: an interventionist state-building exercise that inflamed simmering sectarian rifts to the point of civil war. IEDs, suicide bombers, and urban guerilla tactics became means to offset the logistical and material superiority of the foreign occupiers. In turn, Americans justified their increasingly punitive treatment of the Iraqi population through reference to the environmental and cultural conditions they faced. Such logics of escalating violence, aggravated by disorientation and racism, are not dissimilar from the colonial wars of centuries past. *Colonial Violence* serves as a useful introduction on how to bridge the temporal and historiographical distances between these conflicts. The book provides valuable insights on how environment, technology, race, fear, logistics, economics, and other factors shaped the character of colonial clashes, and why empire is still a valuable means of understanding organized violence in the contemporary world. While perhaps not as inclusive as its English-language title suggests, Walter has written an ambitious and challenging book

that will be of interest to scholars working in a variety of historical subfields.

Notes

[1]. Examples of this tendency are evident in works like John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Random House, 1993).

[2]. Mark Condos, "License to Kill: The Murderous Outrages Act and the Rule of Law in Colonial India, 1867-1925," *Modern Asian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2016): 479-517; Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelback, eds., *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India: White Violence and the Rule of Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Elizabeth Kolsky, "The Colonial Rule of Law and the Legal Regime of Exception: Frontier 'Fanaticism' and State Violence in British India," *American Historical Review* 120, no. 4 (2015): 1218-46; Paul A. Kramer, "Race-Making and Colonial Violence in the U.S. Empire: The Philippine-American War as Race War," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 2 (2006): 169-210; Gavin Rand, "'Martial Races' and 'Imperial Subjects': Violence and Governance in Colonial India, 1857-1914," *European Review of History* 13, no. 1 (2006): 1-20; Michael G. Vann, "Of Pirates, Postcards, and Public Beheadings: The Pedagogic Execution in French Colonial Indochina," *Historical Reflections* 36, no. 2 (2010): 39-58; Kim A. Wagner, "'Calculated to Strike Terror': The Amritsar Massacre and the Spectacle of Colonial Violence," *Past and Present* 233 (2016): 185-225; and Kim A. Wagner, "Savage Warfare: Violence and the Rule of Colonial Difference in Early British Counterinsurgency," *History Workshop Journal* 85, no. 1 (2018): 217-37.

[3]. Charles Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1906); Department of the Army, *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[4]. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (Princeton, NJ: Marcus Wiener Publishers, 1997).

[5]. For recent examples, see Penelope Edmonds and Amanda Nettelback, *Intimacies of Violence in the Settler Colony: Economies of Dispossession around the Pacific Rim* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Levi Gahman, "White Settler Society as Monster: Rural Southeast Kansas, Ancestral Osage (Wah-Zha-Zhi) Territories, and the Violence of Forgetting," *Antipode* 48, no. 2 (2015): 314-35; Margaret D. Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Nancy Rose Hunt, *A Nervous State: Violence, Remedies, and Reverie in Colonial Congo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016); and Lorenzo Veracini, "Founding Violence and Disavowal: The Settler Colonial Situation," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 29, no. 4 (2008): 363-79.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Oliver Charbonneau. Review of Walter, Dierk. *Colonial Violence: European Empires and the Use of Force*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2019.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=52073>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.